

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT  
IN ANNOUNCEMENT OF NEW FREEDOM INITIATIVE

The East Room

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1:10 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Steven, you were brilliant in your introduction. Little did we know -- we kind of thought we'd be sitting here during the California race, didn't we? But here we are, and thank you so much for being here.

I'm so honored that you all are here. I appreciate the folks who served on my coalition for people with disabilities. There's one hero here that I got to know during the campaign -- his name is Jim Mullen. Jim is from Chicago. He's a police officer, wounded in the course of duty, who is a courageous, fine American. And, Jim, thank you so very much for coming today. (Applause.)

I'm glad the First Lady is here. It's an unusual job where all you've got to do is walk down from your living room and come to work. (Laughter.) I'm really proud of Laura.

It's good to see members of the Congress who are here. Thank you all for coming as well. I'm especially pleased that people from all around the country have taken time to help kick off this important initiative.

One of the things I enjoy most about my new job is the walk I get to take every single morning, up the colonnade from the residence to the Oval Office. I say "up," because the path rises just slightly. It's been that way since they took out the steps, so that Franklin Roosevelt could make it to his place of work.

This house is among the first places in America to accommodate people with disabilities. And we have come a long way since the days when only a President could hope for that consideration. We are more mindful now of the hardships that come with disability, more generous in responding to the needs of our citizens, more grateful for the contributions you make to our society.

Old misconceptions about physical and mental disability are being discredited. Old barriers are falling away. Our task is now clear: We must speed up the day when the last barrier has been removed to full and independent lives for every American with or without disability. (Applause.)

I am proud that the last great reform in this cause, the Americans With Disability Act, bears the signature of my dad. (Applause.) I see many in this audience who helped him get this important

legislation through Congress, and I want to thank you for coming. Because of that law, millions of Americans can now compete for jobs once denied them; enter buildings once closed to them; travel on buses and trains once unequipped for them.

For those who have hearing or visual impairments, for those who use walkers and wheelchairs or have mental retardation and mental illnesses, your own country now seems a more welcoming place as a result of that law. Eleven years after the ADA, we are a better country for it.

But there is more to do, and today I propose we move forward. This morning I sent to Congress a set of proposals called the New Freedom Initiative. It is an important step in ensuring that all Americans with disabilities, whether young or old, can participate more fully in the life of their communities and of our country.

Wherever a door is closed to anyone because of a disability, we must work to open it. Wherever any job or home, or means of transportation is unfairly denied because of a disability, we must work to change it. Wherever any barrier stands between you and the full rights and dignity of citizenship, we must work to remove it, in the name of simple decency and simple justice.

Often, as you know, such barriers are unintentional. One is the high cost of assistive technologies. For many people with disabilities, new technologies are helping to defeat dependence and frustration and isolation: Text telephones for those with hearing impairments. Computer monitors for those with visual impairments. Infrared pointers for people who cannot use their hands, allowing them to operate computers by pointing at functions on the monitor or the keyboard. Lighter wheelchairs. Lighter artificial limbs. These modern wonders make the world more accessible; yet, they are often inaccessible to people who need, but cannot afford them. These technologies were once beyond the dreams of Americans with disabilities. Today, they're only beyond their means; and we can help.

In our New Freedom Initiative, we're asking Congress to significantly increase federal funding for low-interest loans so that more Americans with disabilities can purchase assistive technology. And to ensure that even better technologies are available in the future, we're asking Congress to increase federal investment in assistive technology research and development.

My administration will also work with businesses to bring more assisting technologies to the marketplace. Once available, these technologies will allow Americans with disabilities to use more of their own gifts, make more of their own choices and lead lives of greater independence.

Many Americans with disabilities work, or would like to have more freedom to do so. And you know that the greatest challenges are often not in the job itself, but in the distance between your job and your home. For some people with disabilities, this challenge means no job at all; no opportunity to work and to contribute and to use their talents.

This is changing as more Americans work at home. Yet here, too, the cost of computers and telecommuting are sometimes beyond the means of those with disabilities. And we can help. In our New Freedom Initiative, we are asking Congress to create a fund to help people with disabilities to buy the equipment they need to telecommute. We will provide tax incentives to encourage employers to provide such equipment. And we will protect home offices from needless OSHA regulations.

Some 40 million Americans today work out of their homes. For most, it is a convenience. For workers with disabilities, it is a revolution. And we want as many Americans as possible to share in this revolution of independence. (Applause.)

Our plans also include transportation solutions and we want as many Americans as possible to share in this revolution of independence. (Applause.) Our plans also include transportation solutions for people with disabilities. Specifically, we're asking Congress to fund pilot programs for innovative transportation plans that serve people with disabilities. And we'll provide federal matching grants to community groups to provide alternative methods of transportation.

There are several additional proposals in this package, but let me just mention one more. We will provide additional funding each year to help churches, synagogues, mosques and other civic groups become more fully accessible to all Americans. (Applause.) In many houses of worship and civic centers, Intentions are good, but resources are scarce. We can help make these community places open to all.

I've often talked about the goal of a welcoming society, a nation where no one is dismissed or forgotten. Our progress toward that goal is really the great American story. It is a story of inclusion and protection extending across our history to more and more Americans.

And that story's not over. There is still work to do. We must all do our duty and play our part. And I hope today we have made a good beginning. (Applause.)

END 1:20 P.M. EST